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IRAN, THE UNITED STATES AND THE HOSTAGES: AFTER 300 DAYS

INTRODUCTION

The November 4, 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the continued holding of 53 American diplomatic personnel as hostages is a pivotal "hinge" event which has exerted a significant influence on the course of American-Iranian relations as well as the course of the Iranian revolution, the unfolding of U.S. foreign policy vis-a-vis the Persian Gulf, and the state of relations between the United States and its allies. The ongoing hostage crisis is said to have dissipated the paralyzing effects of the "Vietnam syndrome" in Washington as well as stoked the fires of revolutionary zeal in Tehran.

Regardless of its eventual outcome, it is clear that the prolonged confrontation between the United States and Iran is a watershed which will shape the political landscape in each capital for years to come, if only because the fate of the hostages has become inextricably intertwined with the struggles for political leadership in both countries.

The purpose of this paper is to review the development of the hostage crisis by outlining the prevailing currents of Iranian domestic politics which have generated the disjointed Iranian approach to the problem, and by analyzing the shifting U.S. diplomatic strategy for securing the release of the hostages. The recent death of the Shah has fueled speculation that there may soon be a breakthrough in the hostage impasse. However, as this analysis makes clear, the militants who seized the U.S. Embassy were primarily motivated by domestic political considerations, not by the entrance of the Shah into the United States, which merely served as a convenient pretext for the operation. Therefore, the Shah's death will have little, if any, effect on the situation.

THE SEIZURE OF THE EMBASSY

On November 4, 1979, at the height of the an anti-American rally protesting the October 22 entry of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi into the United States for medical treatment, a group of 400-500 militant Iranian "students" assaulted the American Embassy compound in Tehran and took as hostages 63 American employees. (Three Americans, including L. Bruce Laingen, the Charge d'Affaires, had been on an official call to the Iranian Foreign Ministry, and were granted asylum there on November 7). The militants demanded the return of the Shah to Iran to stand trial for crimes against the Iranian people and declared that their hostages would not be released until their demands had been met. Within twenty-four hours, Ayatollah Khomeini had endorsed the demands of the militants via a telephone call to the occupied embassy, and had legitimized their demands in the eyes of the Iranian people by allowing his own son Ahmad to make a high profile visit to the embassy at the militants' request.

The demoralized provisional government of Premier Mehdi Bazargan, undermined by months of political interference and derisive sniping at the hands of Khomeini and his inner circle was incapable of effectively coming to grips with the increasingly turbulent domestic political environment, let alone the fast-moving hostage crisis. The confused response of the provisional government was typical: the Foreign Ministry drifted with the crowds and expressed sympathy with the militants' action while Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi privately informed Laingen that "we hope to have all of them out by morning."

On November 5, Khomeini's son warned Premier Bazargan that he would be resisting the will of the Iranian people if he opposed the occupation of the U.S. Embassy. This was apparently the last straw for Bazargan, who refused to condone an action which was both a clear violation of international law and a direct challenge to his own authority. On November 6, Premier Bazargan resigned, the provisional government collapsed and Ayatollah Khomeini directed the Revolutionary Council to assume control of the Iranian government and prepare for the upcoming national elections.

THE FIRST EMBASSY SEIZURE AND U.S. DEFERENCE

The November 4 seizure of the embassy was by no means an unprecedented event. Less than nine months before, on February 14, 1979, a group of heavily-armed leftists had invaded the embassy compound and briefly held hostage Ambassador William Sullivan and his entire staff before someone in the Islamic revolutionary hierarchy (presumably Khomeini) intervened to release them. The Carter Administration failed to react firmly to the embassy seizure. Not only did it neglect to significantly strengthen the demonstrably weak security of the embassy, but it also failed to publicly respond to the seizure in a manner which would discourage any such future incidents. Instead, anxious to

avoid offending the Khomeini regime which it was assiduously cultivating, the Carter Administration passively turned the other cheek, down-played the incident and prided itself on the avoidance of "overreaction."

A significant precedent had been set: the sovereignty of the U.S. Embassy had been violated without eliciting anything more than a token U.S. response, as Washington preferred inaction to overreaction. This precedent would hardly have deterred, and may even have encouraged, the Iranian militants who later seized the embassy, given the perceived low-risk nature of such a venture.

Although several junior foreign service officers expressed concern about restaffing the embassy after the February attack, the U.S. diplomatic presence was enlarged from about 40 to 70 by November 4. This expansion of the American diplomatic community was a direct outgrowth of the Carter Administration's decision to rapidly improve relations with the embryonic Islamic Republic being constructed under the aegis of the Ayatollah Khomeini. This occurred despite the fact that the Administration had only months before lent its questionable support to the Shah¹ and subsequently to the stillborn Bakhtiar regime in an effort to forestall a total Khomeini victory. The White House over-optimistically hoped to establish a working relationship with triumphant revolutionary forces in Iran immediately after Khomeini's return. In spite of a continuous torrent of anti-American statements by the vitriolic Khomeini, the Carter Administration adopted a conciliatory posture toward the implacable ayatollah and sought to accommodate the Iranian revolutionary camp in order to salvage some vestige of American influence in Tehran.

This policy of deference was based on the assumption that Western dependence on Iran as a major source of exported oil required a strong and cohesive Iranian central government, regardless of the nature of the new regime. The Carter Administration was operating on the premise that the Shiite clerics, who were developing an increasingly potent hammerlock on Iranian political life, would see it in their own interest to cooperate, if only tacitly, with the United States vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, thereby assuring themselves a degree of insurance in the event of a civil war which would pit the Marxist left against the Islamic right. NSC adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, in particular, was reported to have advocated a marriage of convenience with the Islamic regime, which he perceived to be a potential bulwark against Soviet influence.

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1. For an excellent analysis of how the Carter Administration's ambivalent, vacillating policy vis-a-vis Iran undermined the Shah and encouraged the opposition forces, see: Michael Ledeen and William Lewis, "Carter and the Fall of the Shah: The Inside Story," The Washington Quarterly, Spring 1980.

The State Department operated according to a different set of concerns. More than a few at State had long been uncomfortable with Washington's commitment to the Shah and viewed the Iranian revolution, according to one aide, as "a chance to get on the right side of a barricade for once."² Unfortunately, after the collapse of Carter's policy of accommodation toward Iran, the only Americans on the "right side of a barricade" were the hostages held at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

Washington's over-eager wooing of the Iranian revolutionaries began shortly after Khomeini's return to Iran in early February and extended up to the November 4 embassy seizure. In the spring of 1979, the State Department started to encourage American businessmen to return to Iran in their country's best interest as well as their own. During the summer, the White House directed the Pentagon to deliver military spare parts and fuel to the Iranian army in order to aid its campaign against rebellious Kurdish tribesmen. In August, Iranian military transports began arriving in the United States on a regular basis to pick up spare parts contracted for before the revolution.

During the entire period, the Carter Administration soft-pedaled its criticism of the human rights violations of the Khomeini regime and adopted a low-key, don't-rock-the-boat posture with respect to the "revolutionary justice" meted out by revolutionary tribunals, the estimated 1500 executions of political prisoners and petty criminals, and particularly the harsh oppression of the Jews, Bahais, Khuzestani Arabs, Kurds and other minority groups. U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young even went so far as to anoint Ayatollah Khomeini as "somewhat of a saint."

Despite occasional setbacks, such as Iran's refusal in mid-June to accept Walter Cutler as ambassador, and its apparent preference to restrict relations to the charge d'affaires level, the American effort to engineer a U.S.-Iran rapprochement intensified in the fall. On October 20, only fifteen days before the assault on the embassy, Henry Precht, the head of the State Department's Iran Desk, arrived in Tehran for a ten-day visit aimed at improving and normalizing the channels of communication between the two governments. On November 1, NSC adviser Brzezinski met with Premier Bazargan and Foreign Minister Yazdi while attending festivities in Algiers commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Algerian revolution.

Washington's overly conspicuous campaign of reconciliation provoked a spate of warnings in the Iranian press, which was increasingly dominated by Islamic fundamentalists, against an improvement of bilateral relations. Premier Bazargan and Foreign Minister Yazdi were subjected to a barrage of heavy criticism for

2. Richard Burt, "U.S. Quandary in Iran Crisis," New York Times, November 9, 1979, p. A12.

their informal meeting with Brzezinski. By seeking out the Iranian moderates, the U.S. government was in effect making them vulnerable to domestic criticism. These and other warning signs led one Western diplomat to lament that "It was clear that the perception in Washington was several light years behind that in Tehran"; another diplomat observed that "What the Americans were trying to do was reconstruct their old relationship with new partners. They acted as if the revolution had never happened."³

Other analysts have criticized the acquiescent, almost obsequious, manner in which Washington sought to establish cordial relations with the virulently anti-American, anti-Western forces which had gained control of Tehran. Elie Kedourie, author of several books on the Middle East, issued a particularly devastating critique of U.S. policy:

The Shah's departure was, in reality, a great defeat for the U.S. and her allies. But between Khomeini's triumphal return in February and the fall of the Tehran embassy in November 1979, nothing was done to show the world that the U.S. does not abandon its friends, or that the Western alliance does not accept defeat easily. Instead, a vain and delusive search began for "moderates" in Tehran, confirming Iran's neighbors in the belief not only that the U.S. was a weak, unpredictable and treacherous friend, but also that its policies were backed neither by knowledge nor by sound judgment....The stance adopted by the U.S. was apologetic, if not positively self-incriminating and placatory. Such a stance was in itself an encouragement, or rather an incitement to attack the U.S. embassy.⁴

While it can be argued that the deferential U.S. stance encouraged the militants to occupy the embassy because it was interpreted as a sign of weakness on the part of the United States, it is perhaps more accurate to consider the American search for accommodations in the context of domestic Iranian politics, where it was perceived by many anti-American Iranians to be an intolerable bid to partially recoup the U.S. losses sustained in the Iranian revolution.

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3. William Branigin, "U.S. Called Too Eager in Wooing Iran," Washington Post, June 18, 1980, p. A18.
 4. Elie Kedourie, "Western Deference in the Mideast," The New Republic, June 7, 1980, p. 19.

IRANIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS

The loose ad hoc coalition of divergent political groups which forced the Shah into exile was broad but shallow, bereft of any real sense of common purpose beyond the ouster of the Shah. To many members of the Iranian opposition, the Ayatollah Khomeini was not so much an accepted leader as a symbol of resistance. Untainted by any form of association with the Shah, his stern visage and uncompromising willpower provided Iranian dissidents of many stripes with a common rallying point. However, once the initial flush of victory wore off, the latent contradictions in the opposition movement surfaced and the movement dissolved into three rival camps grouped around Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalists, the moderate democrats of the National Front and the radical left.

As the Iranian political arena became increasingly polarized during the course of 1979, the radical left (chiefly the Islamic socialist Mujaheddin and the militant pro-Soviet Marxist Fedayeen), was forced underground by the growing assertiveness of the Islamic fundamentalists and their coercive use of the Pasdaran (Islamic Guards) and the Hezbollahi (the Party of God, an ultra-conservative violence-prone mob of fanatic Moslems generally drawn from the ranks of the uneducated poor, many of whom flocked to the slums of Tehran as the Iranian economy floundered). The moderate democrats, caught in the middle, grew increasingly frustrated and dispirited under the withering criticism levelled at them by Khomeini for their "un-Islamic" Westernized values. Many of their leaders, discredited by smear campaigns in the highly politicized clergy-controlled state media, were also forced underground or into exile, gradually leaving the relatively small Iranian middle class and technocratic elite without any regularized political channels through which to influence the course of the revolution.

While Khomeini led an essentially Persian revolution against a Persian state, he inadvertently pried open a Pandora's box of local drives for ethnic separation, political autonomy and cultural freedom among the many ethnic minority groups which claim the allegiance of 14 million of Iran's 34 million people. Iran's complex mosaic of nationalities, suddenly exposed to a partial vacuum of secular power, began to disintegrate in the face of centrifugal ethnic pressures. Chronic ethnic tensions generated sporadic outbursts of civil unrest and political violence among the Kurds in the west, the Khuzestani Arabs in the southwest, the Baluchis in the southeast, the Turkomans in the north, and the Azerbaijanis in the northeast. This "doughnut of crisis" (especially the Kurdish insurrection which erupted in March 1979 and has

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5. For a more detailed analysis of the Iranian revolution see: James Phillips, "The Iranian Revolution: Long-Term Implications," Heritage Foundation Background #89, June 15, 1979.

persisted sporadically to the present), threatens not only the political authority of Khomeini's Islamic republic, but also the territorial integrity of the Iranian state.

Instead of attempting to defuse separatist appeals by partially satisfying the demands of the minorities, Khomeini, characteristically unwilling to compromise, exacerbated the delicate situation in the peripheral provinces through inflammatory rhetoric and a series of harsh crackdowns aimed at intimidating the leaders of minority groups pressing for any degree of local autonomy. When the Iranian army, demoralized by large-scale purges of its officers and widespread desertion among its soldiers, became bogged down in Kurdistan, Khomeini ordered the undisciplined Pasdaran to join the struggle against rebellious Kurdish tribesmen, succeeding only in increasing the intensity of their resistance by provoking further, often unnecessary clashes.

More than a few observers, noting the shrill hyperbole of Khomeini's invective against the Kurds, are of the opinion that the ayatollah was using the Kurds as a foil in order to incite nationalistic passions among the Iranian people, to rekindle the sense of solidarity which had been dissipated by the splintering of the revolutionary movement, and distract the Iranian people from their mounting social and economic problems. Khomeini on several occasions denounced ceasefires worked out by a representative of the Iranian government to end the bloodshed, just as he was to later sabotage the efforts of Bani-Sadr to resolve the hostage crisis. In both cases the ayatollah sought to prolong the crisis at hand, presumably for domestic political reasons.

The revolution plunged the Iranian economy into chaos. Under the Shah, much of the infrastructure of key industries had been designed, built, administered and maintained by foreign (particularly American) technocrats who fled the country to escape the virulent strain of xenophobia which accompanied the revolution. Stripped of foreign technical advisers and deprived of many of the most competent Iranian managers by political purges and the emigration of disgruntled professionals, many Iranian industries fell into the hands of timid functionaries, who avoided the tough decisions for fear that they would later be chastised for "un-Islamic" acts. Workers' councils, many of them controlled by radical leftists, undermined the authority of the managers and disrupted production through sporadic strikes in pursuit of higher wages as well as purely political goals. Inflation skyrocketed to an annual rate of 50 percent and estimates of unemployment ranged from 30-50 percent.

Khomeini's inner circle could not but have become alarmed by the worsening unemployment situation fearing that the unemployed would become a volatile reservoir of unrest which radical leftists or the Tudeh (Communist) Party might exploit at their expense. In mid-April 1979, hundreds of the unemployed marched through the streets of Isfahan and Sanadaj chanting "Give us jobs or give us back the Shah." By November, the situation had degenerated to

the point where approximately 3 million Iranians out of a total labor force of 11 million were unemployed.

On November 12, little more than a week after the seizure of the U.S. Embassy, hundreds of unemployed workers, organized by leftists, occupied the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs demanding jobs, unemployment payments and health insurance. A series of similar demonstrations in the weeks before the embassy seizure had underlined the political vulnerability of the Islamic fundamentalists on the issue of unemployment. Over the long haul, the unacceptably high level of unemployment constituted a potentially dangerous challenge to their authority since they were constructing a theocratic state which accorded a higher priority to Islamic values than to economic growth.

Fortunately for them, the Shah's visit to the United States was the catalyst for a strident wave of anti-American protest which swiftly drowned out the tentative protests of the unemployed. Once they became acquainted with the diversionary appeal of the occupied U.S. Embassy, Khomeini and his fundamentalist supporters were reluctant to dispense with such a lightning rod for Iranian protest.

THE MOTIVATION AND GOALS OF THE MILITANTS

In early October, when Iran's academic year began, Iranian universities were engulfed by daily demonstrations, often dominated by leftists, protesting Khomeini's ban on "political debate" in their institutions, which was ostensibly dictated by the necessity to preserve the revolution's "unity of word." The demonstrations were tolerated, but Khomeini moved to harness them by opportunistically diverting the attention of the protesters to the Shah's entrance into the United States for medical treatment. On November 1, a communique from Khomeini was broadcast over the state controlled radio which reminded Iranians that November 4 was the first anniversary of bloody anti-Shah demonstrations at the University of Tehran. Noting that in the absence of the Shah "all our problems come from America," Khomeini appealed to the student population to demonstrate against the United States: "It is, therefore, up to the dear pupils, students and theological students to expand with all their might their attacks against the United States and Israel, so they may force the United States to return the deposed and criminal Shah and to condemn this great plot."

While it is clear that Khomeini was seeking to restore his authority over Iran's unruly student population, a large segment of which had been radicalized by the revolution, it is uncertain whether he directly ordered the attack on the embassy or merely accommodated himself to a fait accompli engineered by overzealous followers. Given the ayatollah's ambiguous style of rule, which encouraged a proliferation of semi-autonomous power centers

within the chaotic Iranian political arena, the latter interpretation seems to be the correct one, particularly in view of the aggressively independent activities of the militants throughout the hostage crisis. While the self-termed "Moslem Students Following the Iman's Line" have consistently deferred to Khomeini's public wishes, they are known to have been wracked by sharp internal debates among rival factions at several junctures. Such disagreements would have been extremely unlikely if they merely had been implementing the ayatollah's direct orders.

The occupiers of the embassy are believed to be a loosely organized ad hoc group of militant Islamic nationalists, with a sprinkling of Marxists, recruited on the basis of their willingness to face martyrdom for Khomeini. The majority were apparently middle class students, varying in age from the late teens to the mid-thirties, drawn predominantly from the technical schools of several Tehran universities. The bulk of the ringleaders were drawn from the student population and teaching staff of the Feizieh (Islamic) Science Center in Qom, an institution closely identified with the Ayatollah Khomeini, who taught there before being exiled to Iraq in 1963. While a number of the militants apparently sympathized with the Mujaheddin and several had strong links to the PLO, if there were any Tudeh or Fedaye members involved, they did not publicly admit their affiliations. Many of the militants professed to be anti-Communist Islamic nationalists. Nevertheless, within a few days of the embassy seizure, "leftists surfaced in a bid for power and were forced out."⁶

The embassy quickly became a hothouse of Islamic ideological fervor. At one point, the militants became so fragmented that they reportedly demarcated the sovereign territory of individual factions with a system of strings; there were arguments over which clique would guard key rooms, such as the chancery basement where suspected CIA employees were held. By early January, the National Security Council reportedly had identified five distinct factions operating within the embassy compound: three bona fide Moslem student groups, one group of Marxist non-student radicals, and one group known as the "security force" trained by the PLO.

Discipline was maintained by an eight-member central committee which was apparently heavily influenced by Hojatolislam (sub-ayatollah) Mohammad Moussavi Khoeni, a veteran of Khomeini's Paris exile entourage, who functioned as the spiritual mentor or "chaplain" of the embassy occupiers. Khoeni, a member of Ayatollah Beheshti's clerically-dominated Islamic Republican Party, was the self-proclaimed "religious dean" of Iran's student population and was perhaps the only authority figure consulted by the militants in advance of their operation. (Khomeini's son, Ahmad,

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6. Jonathan Randal, "Hostage Seizure Hones Militants' Political Acumen," Washington Post, March 20, 1980, p. A26.
 7. Jack Anderson, "U.S. Intelligence in Iran Catching Up," Washington Post, January 11, 1980, p. D15.

admitted in an interview on November 20 that he had been in contact with the group prior to the attack, but he denied having advance knowledge of their plans.)

According to one of the ringleaders interviewed by an American reporter, the militants reportedly began planning for the operation around October 1, three weeks before the Shah was admitted to the United States for needed treatment.⁸ The original plan evidently had been to seize control of the embassy, ransack it and steal documents which could be used to embarrass both the Bazargan government and the United States. The motivation for the attack was derived primarily from domestic political considerations. The Islamic fundamentalists were alarmed about the possibility that the relatively moderate secular government was permitting Iran to drift back into the tentative embrace of the United States, which they perceived to be the prime source of the alien Western values that had undermined Islam in recent years.

This apprehension, based on Washington's eager public efforts to improve relations with revolutionary Iran, could only have been heightened by the expansion of the U.S. diplomatic presence and the increasingly insensitive, complacent behavior of American diplomats who were attempting to promote a "business as usual" atmosphere for the resuscitation of Iranian-American relations. According to one Western diplomat: "The Americans did not keep the low profile they should have kept. You should have seen the parties they insisted on giving. A number of embassies including my own advised their people not to go."

In retrospect, a strong argument can be made that the U.S. policy of immediate rapprochement was ill-suited to Iranian domestic political realities. By obsessively trying to seek out and cultivate moderates within the provisional government, Washington was in effect undermining their domestic political position. For the Iranian revolution was by no means over, especially in the eyes of the Islamic right and the Marxist left. Both groups had defined the struggle to overthrow the Shah as a struggle to cleanse Iran of pernicious Western values and influences ("materialism" and "permissive liberalism" to the Moslem fundamentalists; "capitalism" and "imperialism" to Iranian leftists). Both groups wanted Iran to burn its bridges to the United States in order to bar any return, even to a limited extent, of American influence.

This desire was rooted in Iran's historical experience. On four occasions in the past century, successful Iranian nationalist rebellions have been neutralized and partially reversed by the influence of a foreign power. The gains of nationalist uprisings began in 1872 against the British, the 1891 Tobacco revolt and

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8. Don Schanche, "U.S. Hostages Not Part of Original Student Plans," Los Angeles Times, December 8, 1979, p. 1.
 9. Branigin, op. cit.

the Constitutional movement of 1905. These were subsequently diluted when the clerically-led coalition of bazaar merchants, students, intellectuals, and the faithful disintegrated after the initial success. In each instance, after the nationalists had won, westernized defectors from the short-lived nationalist coalition (usually government officials who perceived the clergy to be a barrier to modernization) aligned themselves with an external power (usually the British) to restore to some degree the status quo. In 1953, this pattern was repeated when the Mossadegh regime, weakened by the defection of secular moderates, was overthrown and the Shah returned to the throne with the help of the CIA.

As the United States stepped up its campaign to arrive at a mutually agreeable modus operandi with the Bazargan regime, the Islamic fundamentalists could only have become increasingly mindful of the threat that the United States, as an external power which was attempting to cultivate westernized Iranian moderates, posed to their vision of an Islamic society. The fundamentalists stepped up their rhetorical attacks on the moderates in the fall, focusing in particular on the U.S.-educated Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi, who was considered to have an "unwholesome influence" on Iranian foreign policy.

The embassy seizure was the coup de grace which toppled the Bazargan regime and discredited the moderates, while simultaneously taking the wind out of leftist sails. In one stroke, the Islamic fundamentalists had fractured Iranian ties to the United States and the West, re-focused student protests, diverted the attention of Iranians from festering social and economic problems that the clergy was ill-prepared to resolve, stole a march on the Iranian left, which could only applaud the embassy occupation and revived the waning zeal of Iran's moribund revolution.¹⁰ Moreover, the occupied U.S. Embassy was a highly charged political symbol which could be used to humiliate a superpower, thereby giving Iranians the psychological satisfaction of demonstrating what they considered to be their superior moral strength.

Given all these considerations, it can be argued that the return of the Shah was not the prime goal of the embassy occupation, especially since it appears that the operation was planned before the Shah arrived unannounced in New York. If the militants had merely been seeking the return of the Shah, they would have taken action against Egypt, Morocco, the Bahamas and Mexico, countries where the Shah took refuge months before entering the United States. However, such targets lacked political symbolism

10. Late in November, Khomeini's grandson and advisor, Sayed Khossein, explained that the embassy seizure "enabled us to open the way for a strategic alliance between the Islamic movement and secular and leftist formations, as well as a tactical alliance with the Soviet Union." Strategic Mid-East and Africa, December 12, 1979, p. 4

in Iranian eyes, and were therefore of little value in influencing the course of Iranian domestic politics.

The militants, perceiving themselves to be the vanguard of an ongoing revolution, were more interested in exploiting the embassy seizure for domestic political purposes than for bargaining to gain the extradition of the Shah. It was, therefore, no coincidence that once in control of embassy files they spent as much time gathering documents for "evidence" which would discredit moderate Iranian politicians as they did seeking documents which would discredit the Shah or prove their allegations about the "nest of spies." The Shah's entrance into the United States was not their prime motivation for occupying the U.S. Embassy, but merely a catalytic influence and a convenient pretext which they seized upon, secure in the knowledge that due to the virulently anti-American mood engendered by the Shah's presence in America, the Bazargan regime would be incapable of reversing their action. Thus, they would be assured a prominent platform for discrediting their domestic political rivals as well as the United States.¹¹

THE INITIAL U.S. RESPONSE: RENUNCIATION OF FORCE

From the outset of the crisis, the United States has consistently and firmly rejected Iranian demands to extradite the deposed Shah. In the immediate aftermath of the embassy attack, the Carter Administration, hoping that the Iranian government would secure the release of the hostages, adopted a cautious low-key posture designed to minimize tensions, preclude reprisals against the hostages and defuse the crisis.

Fearful of "over-reaction" and obsessed with maintaining an unprovocative stance, the White House initially ruled out the use, or even the threat, of force as a means of pressuring the Iranians to live up to their obligation under international law to protect accredited foreign diplomats stationed in their country. On November 9, the President's views were publicly expressed for the first time in a White House statement: "The most important concern...is the safety of our fellow citizens held in Tehran."

By ruling out the use of force and publicly proclaiming the safety of the hostages to be his pre-eminent concern, President Carter minimized the immediate threat to the lives of the hostages by sacrificing his long-term bargaining position. In effect, he was unilaterally depriving himself of potential leverage over Iranian behavior while simultaneously strengthening Iranian leverage over his own behavior. By explicitly disavowing the use of force, the President reduced the potential risks which the militants forced other Iranians to bear on behalf of their venture. This not only reduced the domestic political pressures on the

11. See Strategic Mid-East and Africa, December 12, 1979, p. 3.

militants to come to terms, but actually increased public support for retaining the hostages, since as long as the militants held the hostages, the United States would not exercise its legal right to resort to military reprisals. By subordinating other U.S. national interests (national prestige, the deterrence of future terrorist kidnappings of U.S. citizens, and the reassurance of troubled allies, especially in the Persian Gulf region, that the United States is willing and able to protect its own interests) to the question of the safety of the hostages, the President inadvertently enhanced the bargaining value of the hostages in the eyes of the Iranians, giving them little incentive to moderate their conditions for releasing the hostages.

THE RAMSEY CLARK MISSION

President Carter's first initiative to resolve the crisis was to dispatch former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who later surfaced as an ultra-dovish critic of the Administration, and William Miller, the staff director of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, to Tehran on November 6. Apparently, the White House felt that the anti-Shah credentials of these two liberals would give them credibility in revolutionary Tehran, enable them to "reason" with the Iranians and lay the groundwork for a diplomatic resolution of the crisis. However, while their plane was en route to Tehran, Khomeini denounced their mission and prohibited them from entering Iran. Clark spent ten days in Istanbul, calling friends in Iran to plead his case, only to discover that his sanctimonious anti-Shah positions, derived as they were from Western liberal values, earned him little but derision from the vehemently anti-Western Khomeini. Oblivious to the limitation of his own myopic ultra-liberal worldview, Ramsey Clark made contact with PLO officials in Istanbul and reportedly planned to continue his quixotic mission by journeying to Beirut, Lebanon to seek the close cooperation of the PLO. (A high level PLO delegation headed by Abu Walid, had previously been sent to Tehran by Yasser Arafat as a public relations gambit to curry American favor and enhance the PLO's image, but if it was intended to be a sincere effort to resolve the crisis, it was a total failure.)

Fortunately, Clark was refused his request and was retrieved before he could do any further damage. However, his amateurish brand of diplomacy was symptomatic of the Carter Administration's disturbing propensity to value symbols (Clark had marched in a 1979 anti-Shah rally) over substance and its dangerous tendency to elevate idealistic, normative foreign policy considerations over pragmatic considerations of national security. As evidenced by his headstrong behavior at the "Crimes of America" conference held in Iran months later, Ramsey Clark was an individualistic ideologue better suited to moralistic breast-beating than to representing the interests of the American people. By choosing him to perform a sensitive diplomatic mission, the White House displayed the same lack of judgment that had led it to select an apolitical soldier, General Huyser, to report on and operate

within the highly complex political environment which existed in Tehran during the final days of the Shah's regime.

INTERNATIONALIZING THE CRISIS

When the Clark-Miller mission collapsed and Khomeini prohibited all high-level Iranian officials from receiving American diplomats, the United States turned to foreign diplomats to argue its case. The Administration's strategy was to "internationalize" the crisis by framing issues in terms that embraced the interests of other nations (inviolability of diplomatic persons and places) and appealing for support on that basis.

By isolating Iran and marshalling world opinion in condemnation of its illegal act, the White House hoped to force the Iranians to the conclusion that they could present their case to the world in a more effective manner by releasing the hostages. According to a senior White House official: "If the hostages become enough of an embarrassment to them they may decide that it is in their own interest to let them go." The U.S., therefore, sought to deny the Iranians the use of the U.N. as a propaganda platform, while focusing the attention of the Security Council on the plight of the hostages.

On November 9, the U.N. Security Council unanimously voiced its "profound concern" for the hostages and urged "in the strongest terms" that they be released without delay. Despite what one international civil servant termed "an unprecedented moral and political unity" among U.N. members (with the exception of the Vietnamese, North Koreans, Albanians and South Yemenis, virtually every country in the world, including the Soviet Union, condemned the holding of the hostages), the Security Council did not call for any concrete measures apart from urging Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim to "use his good offices" to help reach a diplomatic solution.

When the newly installed Iranian Foreign Minister, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, called for a U.N. Security Council meeting on November 14, in order to publicize Iran's grievances against the United States, the President instructed U.N. Ambassador Donald McHenry to block any Iranian attempt to discuss Iran's problems as long as the hostages were being held. The next day, speaking before the national convention of the AFL-CIO, President Carter declared: "Only after the hostages are released will we be willing to address Iran's concerns...." He condemned the embassy seizure as "an act of terrorism totally outside the bounds of international law and diplomatic tradition," and noted that "We have done nothing for which any American need apologize." He proclaimed that "The United States of America will not yield to international terrorism or to blackmail."

U.S. COUNTERACTIONS: OIL AND FOREIGN ASSETS

During the second week of the crisis the Administration, believing that the volatile first phase of the confrontation was giving way to a less dangerous second phase, geared up for political, economic and psychological warfare against Tehran. On November 12, President Carter banned U.S. imports of Iranian oil in a symbolic display of determination, stating that: "No one should underestimate the resolve of the American government and the American people in this matter. It is necessary to eliminate any suggestion that economic pressures can weaken our stand on basic issues of principle."

The Iranian oil import ban was a pre-emptive neutralization of Iranian oil leverage over the United States designed to weaken the Iranian bargaining position. Although it was an aggressive defensive action, rather than an offensive one, it constituted a symbolic victory over Tehran insofar as the United States seemed to have beaten the Iranians to the draw (the Iranians claimed that they had already decided to embargo oil exports to the U.S. when President Carter instituted the American boycott) and gained the initiative if only for a while.

Prior to the imposition of the boycott, the United States had been importing 700,000-800,000 barrels of oil per day from Iran, the equivalent of 6.5 percent of oil imports or about 3 percent of total oil requirements. Since the world oil distribution network was flexible enough to allow the re-routing of oil traffic through swap arrangements between oil companies, the decision to forego Iranian oil imports imposed insignificant costs on the U.S. economy, aside from increasing the upward pressure on petroleum prices, particularly in the spot market.¹²

On November 14, Bani-Sadr, who directed Iran's Finance Ministry as well as its foreign affairs, announced that Iran intended to withdraw its funds from American banks and their overseas branches "at the suggestion of our sisters and brothers in the central bank." Apparently the Iranians opted for the propaganda benefits of a public announcement, realizing that they had little chance of successfully withdrawing their funds since such an action would have left Americans "holding a very large bag full of defaulted loans and confiscated assets," according to a Deputy Secretary of the Treasury. Alerted by a timely warning from the Department of the Treasury, President Carter declared a national emergency with respect to the "situation in Iran," invoked the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act and blocked the transfer of Iranian funds until Iran's debts to the United States are settled.

12. For a more extensive treatment of the U.S. oil boycott see: Milton Copulos and James Phillips, "The Iranian Dilemma: Energy and Security Implications," Heritage Foundation Background #105, November 16, 1979.

While the property of individual Iranians and private Iranian companies remained untouched, approximately \$8 billion worth of Iranian government assets were frozen, more than half of which were deposited in the overseas branches of U.S. banks. Although the Administration argued that the action taken against Iran was sui generis, the restrictions imposed on Iranian funds gave a psychological shock to foreign investors, especially oil-rich Arab governments, whose confidence in American financial markets was undoubtedly shaken. In the long run, the freezing of Iranian assets in peacetime (in the past assets were blocked in wartime or when diplomatic relations were broken), is a precedent which will raise the perceived risks of investing petrodollar surpluses in U.S. financial instruments, thereby strengthening the hands of those advocating the conservation of oil through production cutbacks in oil-exporting states which already produce more oil than is needed to finance economic development.

U.S. FLIP-FLOPS: THREATS OF FORCE AND U.N. NEGOTIATIONS

Concerned about the deteriorating image of the Islamic revolution, Bani-Sadr and the head of Iran's state-controlled media, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, reportedly convinced Khomeini to order the release of black and women hostages "if their spying is not proven." Thirteen hostages were released in two groups on November 18 and 19 ostensibly because, in Bani-Sadr's words, "Islam has a high regard for women and blacks are part of an impoverished, down-trodden society." After ordering their release, Khomeini suggested, possibly as a sop to the militants who were reluctant to let them go, that the remaining 49 embassy hostages be tried in Islamic courts as spies.

In response to this threat, the White House was compelled to backpedal away from its initial rejection of the use of force. On November 20, President Carter ordered a task force led by the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk to steam from the Philippines to the Arabian Sea to join the aircraft carrier Midway which had been on maneuvers in the area at the time of the embassy seizure. The following day, a White House source officially warned Iran that U.S. military action was a distinct possibility and that Iran would be held "strictly accountable" if the hostages were harmed.

The Carter Administration also reversed course on another front on November 23, when it privately submitted a proposal to Iran's United Nation's representative which called for a Security Council meeting on November 27, the release of the hostages that same day and the establishment of an international commission to investigate human rights violations perpetrated during the reign of the Shah. The Iranians responded with a vague counter-proposal which specified that Iran would "begin the process of terminating occupation of the U.S. Embassy" when the establishment of a commission of inquiry was announced. In spite of the fact that this offer did not meet the American demand for the outright release of the hostages, the Administration was tentatively

willing to consider it if Bani-Sadr was willing to come to the United Nations headquarters in New York to discuss the details.

Bani-Sadr, a radical, Islamic socialist economist, was known to be critical of the embassy seizure, which he perceived to be a counterproductive endeavor: "If it had not been for the hostages, we would have had all world public opinion with us." While he was anti-American in outlook, he was far more flexible than other members of Khomeini's inner circle and was one of the few who favored a diplomatic solution. However, Bani-Sadr was severely constrained by the fervently anti-American atmosphere which pervaded Tehran: "Although I was against taking hostages from the start, now we are confronted with a fait accompli....To free them would be a sign of weakness. Without the American government taking a step it would be impossible. Our public opinion would not stand for it."¹³

Bani-Sadr announced his willingness to attend a Security Council session on December 1, apparently in the belief that Iranian public opinion would become more amenable to a negotiated settlement if Iran was granted a forum within the U.N. with which to present its case to the world. However, the acting Foreign Minister evidently moved too quickly for Khomeini, and the ayatollah denounced the proposed meeting on November 27, possibly influenced by fundamentalist members of this entourage who distrusted Bani-Sadr. The following day, Bani-Sadr resigned in a huff and was replaced by Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, his former rival for leadership of the Iranian student exile community in the sixties.

Ghotbzadeh, a blunt hardliner, relatively less open to compromise than Bani-Sadr, immediately announced that he would not be attending the Security Council session. Washington had compromised its initial position by displaying a willingness to allow Iran to address the Security Council before the hostages had been released. In the process, it had accomplished little except to precipitate an unfavorable change of leadership in the Foreign Ministry.

MULTILATERAL DIPLOMATIC PRESSURES

In the month of December, the United States intensified efforts to "internationalize" the crisis and bring multilateral diplomatic pressures to bear. On December 4, the U.N. Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 457 which "urgently" called for the release of the hostages and a peaceful settlement of outstanding issues. On December 5, President Carter told a group of congressmen that he would "turn the screws a little tighter" day by day to increase pressure on Iran. In mid-December, Secretary of State Vance visited London, Paris, Rome and Bonn to

13. Quoted in Washington Post, November 16, 1979, p. A4.

marshal European diplomatic pressures against Iran. On December 15, the International Court of Justice ruled unanimously in favor of the United States in its preliminary report and ordered Iran to release the hostages immediately.

The Iranians proved to be unresponsive to the pressure of international organizations, which were denounced as instruments of the United States, and frustrated by the tenor of world opinion, which they believed to be manipulated by the American media (American journalists were temporarily expelled from the country in January as a result). Moreover, Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council were becoming increasingly pre-occupied with Iran's internal problems. The hostage confrontation was placed on the back burner because, after all, the hostage-taking itself was an action taken in response to Iran's growing internal difficulties -- an attempt to paper over deepening cleavages in the anti-Shah coalition by unifying Iranians against a convenient scapegoat, the United States.

However, not even the "great Satan" could long divert the Iranian people from their worsening domestic problems. In early December, Azerbaijani Shiites loyal to the Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari clashed with Khomeini's followers in the city of Tabriz. The Azerbaijanis, who make up almost one third of Iran's population, objected strongly to the provisions of the Islamic constitution (approved in an early December national referendum), which gave Khomeini supreme powers as Iran's political and religious overlord. Shariatmadari, an Azerbaijani, was a more moderate and more worldly rival of Khomeini's who deplored Khomeini's dominance over Iranian political affairs.

While an uneasy truce was worked out between Khomeini's forces and Shariatmadari's Moslem People's Republican Party, the fact that the Azerbaijanis, Iran's biggest minority group, had violently demonstrated their opposition to Khomeini after months of relative quiescence underlined the growing unpopularity of the Khomeini regime, especially in the frontier provinces, where the ayatollah had become a symbol of oppression. Faced with such a situation, Khomeini had no incentive to resolve the hostage crisis and every reason to prolong it, since by continually provoking the hostility of the United States, he managed to present Iranians with a powerful external enemy which would give them reason to close ranks behind him.

The Revolutionary Council, preoccupied with domestic turmoil, was also factionalized by the political ambitions of several of its fifteen members, notably Bani-Sadr and the Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti, who appeared to be the chief rivals in the upcoming presidential election. Beheshti, nicknamed the "Iranian Rasputin," is an ambitious, power-seeking clerical activist whose pragmatic outlook and keen political senses make him a formidable opponent. As head of the secretive Revolutionary Council, Beheshti directly exercised power in the executive, judicial, and security organs of government; as head of the Islamic Republican Party, he was

destined to become a dominant legislative power in the Majlis (parliament). Although his presidential ambitions were crushed when Khomeini "advised" the clergy not to run for president, he remained a powerful adversary who persistently bedeviled Bani-Sadr after his election as President and obstructed his attempts to negotiate a diplomatic solution to the hostage crisis.

With the Revolutionary Council split by internal differences and Khomeini maintaining an aloof distance from the day-to-day administration of Iranian affairs, Iran's posture vis-a-vis the hostages became increasingly difficult to decipher. Since direct channels of diplomatic communication to the U.S. had been severed, the international media became a one-way conduit for the demands of competing Iranian power centers. Throughout December and January the militants trumpeted their preparations for spy trials, Ghotbzadeh continually waffled on the subject, and Beheshti claimed that the hostages would appear as witnesses and would be released after the court proceedings. The turbulent domestic political situation forced the major actors to abruptly change their positions frequently, leading the New York Times to complain in an editorial: "Official Iranian statements have a half-life of maybe an hour." At one point the wily Ghotbzadeh warned reporters that if they used his exact words they would be "misquoting" him! In the midst of such chaotic anarchy, meaningful communication, let alone negotiations, were extremely difficult to sustain.

On December 15, the Shah left the United States for Panama, an event that should have markedly altered the status of the hostages if the militants' avowed motivation for seizing the embassy was taken at face value. However, although the militants proclaimed that preparations for spy trials were "accelerated," there was no move on the part of the Iranians to bring the crisis to a head. The hostages were still paying dividends in the domestic political sphere where they served as a rallying point for revolutionary solidarity.

In view of the continuing hard-line voiced by the militants, echoed by Beheshti and endorsed by Khomeini, the United States made known its intention to formally request the U.N. Security Council to impose economic sanctions on Iran on December 21. However, the White House reversed course on December 28 in order to allow Secretary-General Waldheim time to travel to Tehran in an attempt to mediate the crisis. In Iran, Waldheim was coolly received by Iranian officials who chose to interpret his visit as a fact-finding mission and was confronted by hostile crowds. Cutting his trip short, he returned to New York and then traveled to Washington on January 6 for a meeting with President Carter at which the President reportedly rejected the idea that a U.N. investigation would be part of a "package deal" to secure the release of the hostages.

The Security Council met to consider economic sanctions on January 11, but the United States again agreed to postpone voting

on the sanctions issue in order to obtain clarification of an offer of compromise, verbally conveyed to Secretary-General Waldheim by Iran's U.N. ambassador, Mansour Farhang. When the written clarification proved to be unacceptable, the United States pressed for a vote on sanctions on January 13. As expected, the proposal was vetoed by the Soviets. The United States then pledged to impose unilateral sanctions and sought the cooperation of its allies by sending Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Europe.

However, the Administration reversed itself yet again shortly thereafter, quietly shelving the sanctions issue as part of the "response" to the new reality of a Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, which cast the Iranian crisis in a new geopolitical light. The Administration made a calculated effort to drive a wedge between the militants and the mainstream of Iranian public opinion by concentrating its fire on the militants, who were described as "Marxists" working against the interests of the Iranian people in league with the Soviet Union. By the time of his January 22 State of the Union address to Congress, the President had softened his position further, going as far as to hold out the promise of cooperation with Iran once the hostages had been released. (This offer apparently invalidated President Carter's November 27 allusion to reprisals in which he stated his belief that the release of the hostages would not "wipe the slate clean.") If President Carter thought his offer of "cooperation" would be well-received in Tehran he was mistaken, for it had been the prospect of American "cooperation" which had led the militants to seize the embassy in the first place.

By the end of January, the Carter Administration had significantly moderated its stance on the hostage problem through a series of unilateral concessions which failed to elicit any corresponding softening of the Iranian position. The White House had reversed itself on the question of whether Iran would be allowed to address the U.N. Security Council before the hostages were released, on the question of reprisals, and on the question of economic sanctions. It had sought to "internationalize" the crisis in order to isolate Iran, but this dovetailed nicely with Khomeini's desire to expunge Western influence and Western values from his embryonic Islamic republic. By the time that tentative negotiations for the release of the hostages began under U.N. auspices in February, Washington had repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to compromise, to unilaterally forego hardline options, and to whittle away its own bargaining position without obtaining a quid pro quo from the Iranians. (Irving Kristol characterized this approach as a policy of "Reverse Graduated Response.") Given such a track record, the Iranians had little incentive to compromise, for they perceived the United States as a "world devouring" enemy and therefore interpreted American restraints as a sign of weakness.

THE U.N. COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

The concept of a U.N. commission of inquiry, stifled in late November by Khomeini, was revived in mid-January as an American initiative, only to be sabotaged once more by the Ayatollah and his militant followers. On January 17 White House Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan and Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders met in Paris with two unofficial representatives of Iran, French lawyer Christian Bourguet and Hector Villalon, a shadowy Argentine, in the first of several unorthodox "back channel" dialogues. Jordan's efforts upstaged the State Department's special task force on Iran, leading Bani-Sadr to comment later that "rival power centers" had become an American as well as an Iranian phenomenon.

By mid-February, an ambiguous "gentlemen's agreement" had been worked out which would unfold in a series of reciprocal steps. A U.N. commission of inquiry, consisting of five liberal lawyers from Algeria, Venezuela, France, Syria and Sri Lanka would travel to Iran to investigate the U.S. role in Iran under the Shah as well as the U.S. complaints against the Iranians for seizing the hostages. According to the proposal, the U.N. commission would spend about two weeks in Iran gathering information before submitting a report to the U.N. The hostages were to be transferred to government control and eventually released, although the timetable for their release was an open question. The commission's work was to include interviews with the hostages during which it was to determine whether all fifty hostages were in the embassy and were in good health. Washington maintained that the hostages should be released when the commission completed its work in Tehran. However, Khomeini, the Revolutionary Council and even Bani-Sadr refused to admit that there was a direct linkage between the commission's operation and the release of the hostages, instead describing the commission as a "fact-finding mission."

Once the commission returned to New York to report to Waldheim, two previously prepared public statements would be made public in which the two governments would make general admissions of past mistakes. The Iranians would acknowledge their error in holding the hostages in violation of international law and the Americans would acknowledge Iran's past grievances, including an admission of American intervention in Iran, and would take note of Iran's legal right to try to recover the Shah's assets. (Bani-Sadr had stated on February 2 that the Shah need not be returned in order to resolve the crisis, and the militants had insisted that the Shah must be returned -- until February 12 when they announced that they would defer to Khomeini's wishes on the matter.) The United States was also expected to promise that it would not interfere in Iranian affairs in the future.

In spite of the fact that the timing of the hostages' release and the very function of the U.N. commission itself were subject to differing interpretations in Washington and Tehran, the nebulous initiative gained momentum throughout early February. At the

beginning of February, Bani-Sadr meted out harsh criticism of the militants occupying the embassy, castigating them as disruptive "children" who had tried to set themselves up as a "government within a government." He took action to reduce their influence by barring them from automatic access to the state radio and television network.

Bani-Sadr's power was clearly on the upswing in the wake of his clear-cut victory in the January 25 presidential elections with 76 percent of the votes cast. Although his latitude was significantly constrained by the Islamic Republican Party, which was preparing to compensate for its loss in the presidential election by attempting to sweep the upcoming parliamentary elections, Bani-Sadr was the political beneficiary of Khomeini's hospitalization in late January. Suffering from an undisclosed heart ailment, and reportedly temporarily free from the extremist influence of members of his personal "office," Khomeini acted to strengthen Bani-Sadr's hand, possibly in order to leave Iran with firm leadership in the event of his own death. In early February, Khomeini appointed Bani-Sadr to be Chairman of the Revolutionary Council and in late February he unexpectedly appointed him to be commander-in-chief of Iran's armed forces. Although Bani-Sadr claimed on February 13 that the Ayatollah had approved his "secret plan" for the release of the hostages, subsequent events made it clear that Khomeini's support was less than total.

On February 23, the day that the U.N. commission arrived in Iran, Khomeini abruptly changed the ground rules of the hostage question by announcing that the Majlis would determine the conditions for the release of the hostages. (Parliamentary elections were scheduled in two rounds on March 14 and May 9.) Despite this ominous reversal, the Carter Administration's reaction was mild. President Carter was optimistic: "I am not cast into the depths of despair....I think progress is being made." One Administration official admitted that "In effect we're proceeding as though the Khomeini statement was never made." Evidently, the White House was willing to settle for the transfer of the hostages to government control in the apparent hope that the government would be easier to deal with than the militants. The commission set about fulfilling the first part of its mandate, which was to hear Iran's grievances against the Shah and allegations of U.S. complicity in the Shah's purported crimes, but when it tried to fulfill the second part of its mandate, which included visiting the hostages, it became clear that Bani-Sadr was unable to deliver on his promises.

For days the militants refused to allow the commission to visit the hostages. Bani-Sadr and Ghotbzadeh, under attack from fundamentalist newspapers, publicly denied that there was any direct linkage between the commission's investigation and the release of the hostages or that there was any "point certain" at which the hostages would be freed. The situation improved briefly on March 5 when Khomeini sent his son Ahmad to the embassy with a message believed to be an order to hand over the hostages to the

Revolutionary Council. The following day the militants announced that they would relinquish custody of the hostages as a result of "intolerable government pressure." In Washington, President Carter let it be known that if the transfer was completed successfully, he would respond by expressing regret and concern over the course of America's past relations with Iran, in an attempt to satisfy President Bani-Sadr's demand for American self-criticism.

However, the situation deteriorated further on March 8 when the unpredictable Khomeini delphically announced that he would remain silent about the proposed transfer, a seemingly innocuous statement which immediately led the militants to accuse Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh of having lied to them when he said that he had obtained the ayatollah's approval for the transfer. The militants subsequently returned to their previous stance, refusing both to relinquish control of the hostages or to permit the U.N. commission to see them.

Despite last-minute pleas from Ghotbzadeh, and the fact that the U.S. also favored a delay, the commissioners decided they had endured enough personal humiliation at the hands of the Iranians and decided to leave Tehran on March 11 after seventeen confusing days in Iran, their mission rendered impossible by the irreconcilable differences of rival Iranian power centers locked in a byzantine struggle for political dominance. When the commission returned to New York, Secretary-General Waldheim declared that its task had been suspended but not terminated and made it clear that the commission would issue no report until it had completed its assigned responsibilities, which included contacting all of the hostages.

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

On March 13, Bani-Sadr indicated that he favored congressional hearings on America's role in Iran under the Shah, a proposal made in November by Congressman George Hansen. While the Carter Administration rejected this proposal, House Banking Committee Chairman Henry Reuss signalled his willingness to take up the suggestion if it would lead to the freeing of the hostages. On March 25 the White House hardened its position and sent Bani-Sadr a personal message which set March 31 as a deadline for the transfer of control over the hostages and threatened unspecified action if the deadline (later extended to April 1) expired without its terms being met.

On March 29, the Iranian news agency made public a conciliatory letter from Carter to Khomeini that allegedly referred to the "understandable reaction of Iranian youth," which White House spokesman Jody Powell ambiguously disavowed, saying: "messages may or may not have been transmitted....This is a period of some ferment." It turned out that the conciliatory message had been concocted by Ghotbzadeh from oral representations made by Villalon on behalf of the United States, summarizing what Villalon took to be the U.S. position on Bani-Sadr's demands for self-criticism.

This confusing episode was yet another example of how the Carter Administration's penchant for unorthodox, amateurish diplomacy had backfired on it.

On April 1, Bani-Sadr indicated that the Revolutionary Council would accept control of the hostages if President Carter made a formal promise to refrain from "resorting to any propaganda" or "making any provocation" until the Majlis had been formed and reached its decision on the hostages. In an early morning press conference that same day, just before the polls opened for the Wisconsin primary, President Carter characterized Bani-Sadr's statement as "a positive step" and postponed the imposition of economic sanctions yet again.

On April 3, the Revolutionary Council, dominated by the Islamic Republican Party, voted in principle to approve the transfer of the hostages, but warned that President Carter's reassurances were not firm enough and that the transfer could therefore not yet take place. Two days later, Carter informed the Iranians, through Swiss intermediaries, that there would be no further clarifications and informed European allies that if no transfer took place by April 7, he would take stronger measures against Iran. On April 6, the Revolutionary Council reached an impasse on the question of the transfer and decided to defer to Khomeini's final consideration. On April 7, Khomeini's office announced that "the hostages and the embassy will remain in the hands of the students until the formation of the Majlis."

That same day President Carter, maintaining that "The Iranian government itself can no longer escape responsibility by hiding behind the militants at the embassy," announced the following measures:

1. The breaking of diplomatic relations with Iran (only the second time that the U.S. had initiated a formal break since Cuba in 1961, the other being the Republic of China 15 months earlier).
2. The imposition of an economic embargo of all exports to Iran except food and medicine.
3. The inventory of the \$8 billion of frozen Iranian government assets.
4. The cancellation of all visas issued to Iranians for entry into the United States and the denial of future visas "except for compelling and proven humanitarian reasons or where the national interest of our country requires."

On April 17, the President escalated pressures on Iran further by:

1. Banning all imports from Iran.
2. Prohibiting the travel of U.S. citizens to Iran (except for journalists).
3. Releasing impounded military equipment, ordered by Iran, for use by U.S. forces or for sale to third countries.
4. Making preparations to request from Congress the authority to use the \$8 billion of frozen Iran funds to pay reparations to the hostages and their families and to reimburse the U.S. armed forces for the costs incurred responding to the crisis.

The imposition of sanctions, like most of Washington's actions up to that point, was largely symbolic in nature. American commerce with Iran had long since been reduced to negligible proportions by the freeze on Iranian assets and the refusal of American longshoremen and the Brotherhood of Railway and Airlines Clerks to load ships and planes bound for Iran. Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher outlined the rationale for the sanctions in his appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 8: "Our purpose in the constantly shifting Iranian equation is to establish one unalterable constant: as long as the hostage situation continues, things will get worse for the Iranian people."

While this was indeed an important point to make to the Iranians, it was a point which would have had a greater impact if it had been made much earlier in the crisis instead of 155 days after the seizure of the embassy. By continually postponing the imposition of sanctions, the White House gave the Iranians time to adjust to the measures and diversify their sources of imports wherever possible. Moreover, the constant delays undermined the sense of urgency which Washington wished to convey both to Iran and to America's allies.

The European allies, relatively more dependent on Iran for oil and trade than was the United States, were loathe to jeopardize their economic stake in Iran for an American administration which was renowned for its "Carter shocks" -- sudden policy shifts engineered without any warning, let alone any meaningful consideration of how the interests of allies would be affected. The Europeans considered U.S. policy toward Iran to be poorly conceived, poorly defined, poorly implemented and overly politicized by the ongoing presidential campaign. However, once the White House had irreversibly committed itself to economic sanctions, the European allies reluctantly fell into line on April 22, deciding to impose phased economic and diplomatic sanctions on Iran which included an immediate ban on new contracts and a total embargo on all exports unless "decisive progress" was made by May 17.

When the Europeans met May 18 in Naples to decide upon the second phase of sanctions, they watered down the April 22 pledge, ostensibly in anger over American "deception" concerning the attempted hostage rescue mission, and excluded from the embargo all contracts signed before November 4. By one estimate, these sanctions would only affect 8 percent of Europe's \$1.1 billion in trade with Iran.¹⁴ The British, disillusioned by the ineffective fifteen-year embargo of Rhodesia, diluted their sanctions even further due to a revolt in the House of Commons. (Incidentally, several of the "sanctions-busting" experts who prospered from Rhodesia's economic isolation are reported to have set up shop in Bahrain, a major entrepot for Iran.)¹⁵

Given the half-hearted European response, the trans-shipment of embargoed goods from Bahrain and Dubai, the recent upsurge in Iranian trade with Soviet bloc countries and the chaos which has already paralyzed the Iranian economy, the U.S. economic sanctions, on balance, will be more important for political and psychological reasons than for economic reasons.

THE RESCUE MISSION

On April 24, President Carter initiated a rescue mission, which was subsequently aborted when three out of eight RH-53 helicopters assigned to the mission broke down over the Iranian desert in the first stage of the operation. During the withdrawal of the ninety-man "Blue Light" commando force, eight men were killed and five injured when a helicopter and a C-130 transport plane collided in the darkness. Because it was feared that the other four helicopters might also have been damaged in the collision, the remaining personnel embarked on five transport planes, leaving behind five helicopters, the wreckage of the accident, the bodies of the eight dead and papers pertaining to subsequent stages of the operation.

While the rescue operation was boldly conceived, the intolerably high rate of equipment failure and American dead made its execution a military embarrassment (The Economist bewailed the "Carterian incompetence" of the operation). Because the demonstrated ability to effectively utilize military force is a prime component of national power (especially for a country such as the United States, which has made extensive commitments all over the world to underwrite the security of its allies), the aborted rescue mission has also generated unhealthy political fallout for Washington.

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14. David Fourquet, "European Community Scowls as it Starts Iran Embargo," Christian Science Monitor, May 23, 1980, p. 10.
 15. Strategy Week, July 7, 1980, p. 3.

The debacle in the desert is likely to undermine the confidence of troubled pro-Western Persian Gulf states in the reliability of American military power in general and in the effectiveness of the "Carter Doctrine" in particular. Moreover, the timing of the raid itself, led to unfavorable political repercussions which further strained the Atlantic alliance. The raid came only three days after the European Community had voted to apply phased sanctions under the impression that such sanctions would delay the need for an American military response. The Europeans once again felt misled by the Carter Administration, and resented being taken for granted and manipulated without being consulted on matters which affected their national interests.

The operation itself had been on the drawing boards since November. The original plan reportedly called for a larger force of 600 men and 30 helicopters. However, the strong force plan was scaled down, apparently because a smaller operation was perceived to be less provocative to Iran's neighbors, more manageable and more politically acceptable at home. Many analysts later criticized the small size of the force, the lack of backup forces and the narrow margin for error which the lack of adequate redundancy imposed on the local commanders. Noted strategist Edward Luttwak suggested that military planners may have been influenced by presidential meddling in the planning process. Pentagon consultant Steven Canby, a former Army officer, was critical of the poor coordination among the military services, the fuzzy lines of authority during the operation and the overly elaborate communications system that magnified the role of the White House and reduced the leadership role of the local commanders.

A secret report prepared by the staff of the Senate Armed Services Committee for the ranking Republican, Senator John Tower, concluded that "major errors" were made in the planning and execution of the operation.¹⁶ In addition, the report cited insufficient training, inadequate equipment maintenance, poor contingency planning and "fragmentation of command responsibility" as reasons for the failure. Other analysts, noting that the helicopters involved had been extensively pampered by a reinforced maintenance group on board the aircraft carrier Nimitz, publicly wondered how effectively less experienced personnel would be able to service and operate front-line weapon systems in a future conflict. On August 23 a military review panel organized by the Pentagon reported that excessive secrecy undermined the planning, rehearsals and execution of the operation.

Perhaps the most damaging critique of the aborted rescue mission was offered by Jeffrey Record, senior fellow at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis. In view of the "profound mistrust of military power in general" demonstrated by the Carter

16. Richard Burt, "Major Mistakes on Iran Mission Noted in Report," New York Times, June 6, 1980, p. A1.

Administration in its first three years in office and its "no less profound hesitancy" to wield power in defense of threatened interests during the course of the hostage confrontation, Record wrote: "Is it illogical to assume that an administration with a record of demonstrable nervousness in contemplating the use of force would, when force is needed, be niggardly in supplying it as well as vulnerable to losing its nerve when force is actually in the process of being used?"¹⁷ There has also been speculation that the White House aborted the mission due to Soviet detection and interference with the operation.¹⁸

Despite the unproductive results of the aborted raid and the resignation of his Secretary of State, President Carter, at one point, pronounced the operation to be an "incomplete success" and at another point declared that the crisis was "alleviated to some degree." However, although the raid had "alleviated" immediate domestic pressures on his administration to do something concrete on behalf of the hostages, it had accomplished little for the hostages themselves. While Secretary of Defense Harold Brown refused to rule out another rescue attempt, the prospects for such a mission were extremely poor given the fact that the militants have dispersed the hostages among many cities. In the months since the failed rescue mission, the White House has made no discernible policy initiative to resolve the crisis, aside from signalling its continued willingness to resume the "package deal" arrangement entailing the U.N. commission, which was previously sabotaged by the Iranians.

At this point, American policy seems to have been reduced to a strategy of waiting for events to run their course and hoping for the best. The United States has allowed itself to be maneuvered into a position where it does little but react to the latest press release from Tehran: a sad state of affairs for a world power, let alone a superpower.

THE IRANIAN REACTION TO THE RAID

The Iranian reaction to the aborted rescue mission was relatively subdued. Ghotbzadeh called the rescue attempt an "act of war," but warned the militants at the embassy not to act "nervously." (The militants had repeatedly threatened to kill the hostages if the U.S. intervened militarily.) The hardline religious members of the government, including the Ayatollah Beheshti, were "unusually quiet." Defense Minister Mustafa Shamran said, for the first time, that the hostages should be released, presumably acutely aware of the vulnerability of Iran to further American military pressures. For the most part, the

17. Jeffrey Record, "Military Reputation, Political Nerve and Desert 1," Wall Street Journal, May 8, 1980, p. 25.

18. See: Strategy Week, May 19, 1980, p 1.

rescue attempt appears to have been a sobering experience for the Iranians. However, a study by the Congressional Research Service concluded that the mission had contributed to the deteriorating domestic political position of Iranian moderates, including President Bani-Sadr.

Khomeini attributed the "victory" over the Americans to Allah and reminded the Iranian people of Allah's unequivocal support for Iran's Islamic revolution. Significantly, he warned that if the United States used military force against Iran, the militants would kill the hostages and Iran would stop the flow of oil through the Straits of Hormuz. In view of the fact that 1) Khomeini's statement virtually gives the militants advance justification for reprisals against the hostages, and 2) assuring the undisturbed flow of Persian Gulf oil to the industrialized West is perhaps America's most vital interest in the entire Middle Eastern region, Khomeini's double threat is a formidable deterrent to U.S. military action as long as the hostages remain unharmed.

Suddenly confronted with the possibility of armed retribution, the militants reacted by dispersing the hostages to major cities around Iran. This move entails increased risks for the hostages, since it breaks the bond of shared experience between the hostages as a group, and the militants as a group, and exposes the hostages to the potential wrath of local groups in their new surroundings (the militants claim that an unidentified gunman fired upon the house holding the hostages in Mashad). On the other hand, the dispersal of the hostages also lowers the profile of the militants and reduces their ability to influence the day-to-day affairs of Iranian political life. This could make Bani-Sadr's task easier by dissipating the atmosphere of revolutionary militancy which the "students" continually sought to impose on Tehran.

Another significant repercussion of the rescue mission was the discredit which it brought upon the Iranian armed forces. Not only had they been unable to detect or intercept the raiders, but the Iranian Air Force had mysteriously strafed the helicopters, destroying them before all the secret documents had been removed, killing a commander of the Pasdaran in the process. The officer corps was suspected of retaining a lingering loyalty to the Shah and of harboring pro-American sympathies developed in the course of training programs in the United States.

The prominent role which the American agents were to play in the final stages of the operation fanned suspicions about fifth columnists. (The growing strength of several Iranian exile groups in neighboring Iraq, as well as Europe, had already caused

19. See: "IRAN: Consequences of the Abortive Attempt to Rescue the American Hostages," Iran Task Force, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, Congressional Research Service, May 2, 1980.

such rumors to develop.) Bani-Sadr contributed to the atmosphere of paranoia by claiming that the United States had infiltrated a force of American and Iranian saboteurs into the country to subvert the government. In mid-July, the government disclosed an alleged plot by Iranian air force personnel to assassinate Khomeini and stage a coup d'etat. (Bani-Sadr claimed that this was the seventh coup attempt in six months.)

At present, it is unclear whether segments of the Iranian armed forces have actually attempted to seize control of the country or whether the fundamentalists are merely playing up the threat of a coup in order to justify the purge of pro-Western military officers. However, the continuing turmoil within the ranks of the military is symptomatic of a wider struggle for control of all Iranian institutions being waged between the Islamic fundamentalists and the secular moderates.

IRANIAN DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS

From the beginning, the fate of the hostages has been inextricably intertwined with the course of Iranian domestic politics. As prominent symbols of American power in a country undergoing a xenophobic revolutionary backlash against western influences, the hostages have become imbued with a highly charged political symbolism which makes them a factor to be manipulated by contending Iranian political groups. Since Bani-Sadr's election to the presidency in late January, Beheshti's Islamic Republican Party (IRP) has sought to undermine his political position through veiled attacks in client newspapers, campaigns to discredit his government appointees and, more recently, outright criticism of the President himself.

The Ayatollah Beheshti has used the hostages as a tool in his effort to discredit Bani-Sadr and the Western-educated "Stanford Mafia." After Bani-Sadr's landslide election victory, Beheshti hardened his own views on the hostage question and blocked Bani-Sadr's efforts to negotiate a solution in order to dramatize the President's impotence and keep the pot boiling. By sharply limiting the powers of the presidency, while enhancing the role of the Prime Minister, securing IRP control over the state apparatus and attaining IRP domination of the Majlis, Beheshti is working to reduce Bani-Sadr to a figurehead.

Although he commands considerable popular support, Bani-Sadr has proved an inept politician unable to translate his popular appeal into real political power. A soft-spoken intellectual more comfortable with political theories than with political power plays, he has been continually out-maneuvered and overruled by his fundamentalist political rivals. Bani-Sadr has failed to build a party organization capable of competing with the network of politically active mullahs, organized down to village level, that the IRP commands. Because he has had no experience in government, Bani-Sadr is saddled with a nebulous administrative

style which has precluded him from consolidating his control of the state bureaucracy, let alone the country. His propensity to launch into long-winded speeches without ensuring adequate follow-up on his orders has earned him the nickname Bani-Harf - "Son of Talk" (Bani-Sadr means "Son of Leader" in Farsi).

The politically hamstrung President appears to have been worn down in much the same fashion that Premier Bazargan was in the months before the embassy seizure. By June the Ayatollah Khomeini had joined the growing chorus of Bani-Sadr's critics and on June 27 he openly questioned the effectiveness of the President's leadership. On June 28, the embattled Bani-Sadr felt it necessary to submit a letter of resignation to the ayatollah, to be accepted whenever Khomeini came to the conclusion that the president was no longer capable of ruling. Another manifestation of Bani-Sadr's growing weakness was his inability to name a like-minded prime minister. After unsuccessfully offering the job to a number of candidates including Admiral Madani (an ambitious nationalist who refused to subject himself to the humiliations which he knew the fundamentalists would impose on Bani-Sadr's choice), and Khomeini's son (a choice which the ayatollah coolly rejected), Bani-Sadr nominated IRP member Mostafa Mir-Salim as prime minister. Although this choice was said to be an indication of Bani-Sadr's willingness to compromise with his fundamentalist rivals, Mir-Salim, a maverick IRP member, was not considered to be sufficiently militant by the IRP leadership. In the second week of August, President Bani-Sadr was forced to appoint a hard-line fundamentalist Mohammad Ali Rajai as prime minister, a choice which was regarded to be a victory for the Islamic fundamentalists.

Throughout the entire hostage affair, the Ayatollah Khomeini has played a crucial but essentially reactive role in Iranian deliberations concerning the fate of the hostages. In the tradition of Shiite Islamic teachers, Khomeini prefers to hold himself above the fray, intervening only when forced by events. The Ayatollah's equivocal attitude allows him to play factions against each other, thereby maintaining a situation of controlled anarchy or "balance of powerlessness" which maximizes his own influence over Iran's affairs. His enigmatic silences are frequently punctuated by delphic pronouncements which are left to others to interpret and implement.

Khomeini has been a major obstacle to the peaceful resolution of the confrontation from the beginning. It was Khomeini who sanctioned the "student" takeover of the embassy, dismissed Bazargan's provisional government and blocked Bani-Sadr's proposed trip to speak before the U.N. Security Council, as well as the President's "package deal" agreement in March and the transfer of the hostages to government control in April. Because the ayatollah views history as a "divine ritual" he perceives the hostage issue as an archetypal struggle between good and evil. He has encouraged Moslems all over the world to rise up against the United States, declaring: "This is not a struggle between the United States and

Iran, it is a struggle between Islam and blasphemy." Since he himself is ostensibly responsible for interpreting and promulgating God's will, for him compromise is tantamount to a denial of that will.

For the foreseeable future, the ayatollah looms large in any scenario for securing the hostages' freedom, given his authority over the otherwise unbridled militants (recently demonstrated in his ability to free ailing hostage Richard Queen on July 10), and his de facto veto power over the Iranian government. However, if the eighty-year-old Khomeini's heart ailment should prove fatal (there have been reports that an ambulance is permanently parked outside his house in case of emergency), it is uncertain that his successor could command the obedience of the militants. Although they have deferred to Khomeini's order to consign responsibility for resolving the hostage issue to the Majlis, even this could change in the event of Khomeini's death.

THE MAJLIS AND THE HOSTAGES

At present, the major locus for Iranian decision-making regarding the hostages is the Iranian parliament -- the Majlis. The referral of the hostage crisis to the Majlis is not likely to produce a quick solution of the problem given Iran's hostile, anti-American mood (a mood which Khomeini and the militants have recently sought to heighten with their incendiary remarks about the alleged "torture" of pro-Khomeini Iranian demonstrators following their late July arrest in front of the White House).

The Majlis is a consultative assembly intended to be a forum for discussion rather than decision. Few of its members have any experience in parliamentary procedure or in government. According to traditional Islamic custom, a parliament was not set up for purposes of legislative representation, but for the purpose of arriving at a consensus which itself was inspired by God.

The 270 seats in the parliament were supposed to be filled in the two-stage parliamentary elections held in the spring. However, there currently are an estimated 30 vacancies due to cancellation of the spring elections in some provinces and the disqualification of a number of elected candidates for thinly veiled political reasons (the militants used "evidence" culled from U.S. Embassy files to discredit at least six potential members). Ayatollah Beheshti's Islamic Republican Party appears to be the only effective party organization in the Majlis and is estimated by one count to control at least 150 votes, including the votes of an estimated 80 Islamic clerics.

The militant clerics have made it clear that they are in no hurry to settle the hostage crisis and deliberations could easily extend into the fall. When the Majlis was convened in early June, neither President Bani-Sadr in a speech, nor Khomeini in a letter, even mentioned the question of the hostages. In its early

weeks the parliament set about organizing itself and chose hardline IRP member Hojatolislam Rafsanjani as speaker. Ramadan, the holiest month in the Islamic calendar (a month of mourning and fasting which began on July 14), has significantly reduced the level of activity in the fervently religious body, but the pace of deliberation should pick up again shortly.

When the hostage issue does come to the forefront, it is certain to generate heated debate and revolutionary Islamic fervor among the many ambitious members of parliament who are anxious to acquire a "revolutionary luster" which would enhance their future political prospects. While aspiring political figures will have considerable incentive to mouth virulently anti-American rhetoric, there will be relatively few incentives which encourage moderation, especially if the debates become a three-ring media event. Conciliation is likely to be viewed as a sign of appeasement and moral weakness.

The attitude of Beheshti, who commands the single largest voting bloc, will be crucial to the course of the consensus-building process, as will the ruminations of Khomeini, observing the deliberations from afar. The pragmatic Beheshti's attitude is likely to be affected by the status of his continuing power struggle with Bani-Sadr. If the founder of the IRP can reach an amenable compromise with Bani-Sadr, or if Beheshti can win their political battle outright -- consigning the President to the role of a figurehead, or forcing his resignation -- then there is a strong possibility that Beheshti would function as a restraining influence in the parliamentary process. Many observers feel that Beheshti would be moved to the same conclusion reached by Bazargan and Bani-Sadr: the rigid revolutionary fanaticism of the militants constitutes a threat to Iranian civil authority and isolates Iran internationally at a time when it faces increasing pressures from Iraq, the Soviet Union and the United States.

A potentially explosive subordinate question to be decided by the Majlis is the issue of spy trials for the hostages. While there is no basis in Islamic law for the trial of diplomats on spying charges (Mohammad even explicitly ruled out the application of Islamic justice to foreign emissaries), Khomeini has invoked the concept of "the corrupt of the earth" -- people guilty of crimes against God -- as the ostensible justification for such trials. Khomeini's threat to stage spy trials is in part an extension of his long-fought struggle against extra-territoriality. In the early sixties, the ayatollah was infuriated when the Shah granted American military personnel a large degree of immunity from prosecution in local courts. Since the ayatollah has repeatedly demonstrated a highly developed appetite for revenge since his triumphant return to Iran in February 1979, it is arguable that his inclination to stage spy trials is at least partially motivated by a desire to avenge the perceived humiliation suffered by Iran in the name of extra-territoriality in the past.

Although Khomeini has held back from issuing a direct order for spy trials, the embassy militants have vehemently advocated bringing the hostages to "Islamic justice." On May 20 the militants warned the members of the soon-to-be convened Majlis that:

Since a trial of the spies is the demand of the Imam and the nation, if anyone in the Majlis does not vote for the trial and sentencing it will be clear that he does not speak for the nation.

The Ayatollah Beheshti has indicated that he favors the trial of at least some of the hostages but has displayed a degree of flexibility on the issue. Most deputies in the Majlis are believed to favor trials of some sort, but there have also been suggestions that in the event of espionage trials, U.S. policy, not the hostages themselves, would be in the dock. However, at least three hostages have been identified as CIA agents and it is this group which faces the greatest danger of serving as scapegoats in judicial proceedings.

President Bani-Sadr, aware of American threats that spy trials would have the "most serious consequences," has persistently lobbied against such trials, arguing in June that if the Americans were to be tried and some were found to be innocent "then we would be faced with the question of why they were kept for seven months." The President has also pointed out that trials involving legal counsel would raise questions about "why the foreigners are accorded such a privilege but others are deprived of it." Because his political power is visibly ebbing, Bani-Sadr is unlikely to wield much influence over the Majlis.

In any event, it should be pointed out that the Majlis is far from a representative body. It is significantly more conservative and more fervently Islamic than the Iranian body politic taken as a whole and it does not reflect the political opinions of many Iranian ethnic minorities, moderate democrats, or Marxist radicals. Any decision which it reaches on the question of spy trials is likely to be influenced as much by domestic political considerations as by legal "evidence" supplied by the militants. At this point, all the United States can do is reaffirm the dangerous repercussions which spy trials would impose upon Iran and adopt a low-key posture vis-a-vis the hostages for the immediate future to minimize the chances that a sudden flare-up of bilateral tensions would provoke a harsh response by the Majlis on the question of spy trials.

CONCLUSION

The Carter Administration has found itself at the mercy of a revolution which it had assiduously attempted to accommodate. Its conciliatory efforts to engineer a rapprochement with Iranian secular moderates heightened the apprehensions of militant Islamic

fundamentalists who were fearful that such a reconciliation would dilute the Islamic content of their revolution. The radical Islamic militants who seized the U.S. Embassy were primarily motivated by domestic political considerations: the desire to abort the growing detente between Washington and Iranian secular moderates, to discredit the Bazargan regime, to undercut the appeal of radical leftists, and to find a scapegoat which would restore the revolutionary solidarity of the disintegrating anti-Shah coalition by diverting attention from Iran's mounting internal problems. The entrance of the Shah into the United States for medical reasons was more of a catalyst and a convenient pretext for the invasion of the embassy than it was a source of motivation.

The White House made several mistakes early in the crisis which have persistently undermined the American bargaining position throughout the confrontation. By publicly declaring the safety of the hostages to be his predominant concern, President Carter in effect made U.S. options hostage to the increasingly vociferous threats of reprisals issued by the militants against the captive diplomats. (When the Iranians were confronted with a similar situation in early May, due to the seizure of their London embassy by three Iranian Arabs, they downplayed their concern for the twenty hostages taken there and proclaimed that the hostage Iranian diplomats were "ready to die as martyrs for the revolution.") By initially ruling out the use of force, the President unilaterally reduced the perceived risks which the militants forced other Iranians to bear on behalf of their venture, thereby reducing domestic pressures on the militants to moderate their demands. By allowing the hostages to become (in his own words) an "absolute total obsession," President Carter in effect made himself the fifty-fourth American hostage and increased the perceived value of the other hostages to the Iranians.

Once the situation at the embassy had stabilized, the White House began a marathon round of "roller coaster diplomacy" which alternately raised and dashed the hopes of the American people in a willy-nilly manner. Instead of taking a clearcut stand that rejected outright the bending of principles to negotiate a hostage release, the Administration allowed itself to be lured into a diplomatic labyrinth constructed along the preferred lines of the Iranians. In the course of negotiations, President Carter manifested an enormous capacity to be misled by the Bani-Sadr/Ghotbzadeh "Nice Guy/Tough Guy" routine. He repeatedly made concessions in advance to the Iranians without concrete guarantees that he would extract concessions from them in return. As a result, the White House made one retreat after another, sacrificing its own bargaining leverage and the President's already depleted credibility in the process.

First, the United State implicitly accepted the concept of an international commission sitting in judgment of the policies of past American presidents. Then it agreed to staff the commission with Third World and leftist figures sympathetic to the Iranian revolution. Next, it accepted the proposal, which it had

previously explicitly rejected, that the commission would first examine Iranian complaints before addressing the plight of the hostages. Once committed to such a shaky venture, it had little choice but to accept the principle that the ultimate release of the hostages would be determined by a parliament that had not yet been elected. By making a "gentleman's agreement" with notoriously unreliable authorities, the President mistakenly relied on the good will of a revolutionary movement that made no effort to disguise its unequivocal hatred of the United States and of the President himself.

The questionable judgment displayed in blindly negotiating with the chimera of an Iranian government that stood little chance of negotiating a diplomatic solution to the confrontation without discrediting itself in the process was also displayed in the President's choice of diplomatic emissaries. Over a period of several months, the White House assembled a motley group of amateur diplomats ranging from Ramsey Clark, the breast-beating "unguided American," who later served as America's self-appointed representative at the "Crimes of America" conference in early June, to Hamilton Jordan, who was previously better known for causing diplomatic incidents than for his skills in resolving them. Bourget and Villalon, foreign figures sympathetic to Iran, were chosen to function in the highly sensitive role of intermediaries. Even Billy Carter was reportedly called upon to work through his Libyan contacts, at the suggestion of the Mrs. Carter. The Iranians must have regarded such a reliance on unorthodox tag team diplomacy as a sign of desperation, a conclusion which was not likely to lead them to soften their demands.

The Administration's diplomatic strategy was to unite the world against Iran and to divide Iran against itself. However, the President failed to effectively mobilize America's allies to maximize multilateral pressures on Tehran. Lengthy negotiations dissipated the sense of urgency and outrage while the on-again/off-again status of formal sanctions did little to reassure U.S. allies of the steadfastness of American purpose. European allies were hesitant to follow Washington's policy zig-zags, given their previous experiences with sudden "Carter shocks" and their suspicion that the President was tailoring his response to Iran to fit his domestic political needs.

The American effort to divide Iran against itself was undermined by Washington's obsessive search for accommodation with Iranian moderates, a policy which gave Iranian hardliners ample ammunition to discredit those who favored compromise. The Iranians also made a concerted effort to divide America against itself, first by releasing blacks and women hostages in an obvious attempt to disrupt the unity of American public opinion, and then by encouraging the flow of a stream of radical American dissidents, liberal ideologues, sympathetic academics and pacifist clerical activists to Tehran. The Iranians hoped to manipulate these visitors for propaganda purposes within Iran itself, the international community in general, and the United States in particular.

On one such visit, William Sloane Coffin went so far as to compare the Carter Administration's handling of the hostage crisis with the American bombing of Vietnam. This rhetorical flourish must have greatly pleased the Iranians, some of whom were apparently convinced that, given enough time, a large number of Americans would protest the policies of their government with respect to Iran in much the same fashion that they had protested the policies of their government in Vietnam.

The Carter Administration's handling of the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis has unsettled American allies, particularly in the Middle East. Both the Israelis and the moderate Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf were troubled by Washington's passive acceptance of the fall of the Shah, a long-time ally, and its failure to respond forcefully to a direct attack on its own citizens. Given the slow motion American response (economic sanctions were not formally imposed until 155 days after the seizure of the embassy and the rescue mission was not launched until 172 days afterward), the timeliness and effectiveness of a U.S. military response in the event of a future crisis has been called into question. Moreover, in a region where the concept of national honor is taken extremely seriously, American restraint is increasingly interpreted as American weakness.

The hostages have been trapped in an Iranian morality play of good versus evil in which they have come to symbolize past U.S. policy toward Iran. Because of this highly-charged political symbolism, they have become a factor in the ongoing internal Iranian struggle. They will be released only when the Iranians come to the conclusion that it is in their own interest to release them.

The hostages are steadily losing their value in Iranian eyes. Because the Shah has died, they no longer can entertain the far-fetched hope that the United States would deliver him to stand trial. They have already extracted considerable propaganda mileage from the hostage venture and can not hope to extract much more either at home or abroad. Spy trials would provide marginal propaganda benefits but would entail considerable risks if the Carter Administration's threats of reprisals retain a sufficient degree of credibility.

Most importantly, the domestic political goals served by the occupation of the embassy have been attained to a significant extent. The Bazargan regime has been swept away and the Bani-Sadr regime is showing signs that it soon may follow. The embassy seizure allowed the Islamic fundamentalists to outflank the Marxist left by monopolizing the popular anti-American soapbox and bought them time to stage a "cultural revolution" to drive the Marxists out of the universities as well as other institutions. As long as they held the American hostages, the fundamentalists had reason to believe that they could count on the support of the Soviet-controlled Tudeh Communist party. Now that the Fedayeen and Mujaheddin have been compelled to restrict their political

activities, the fundamentalists have gained a greater degree of latitude to deal with the Tudeh and do not need the hostages as insurance.

The Islamic fundamentalists will also have steadily growing incentives to negotiate an end to the hostage impasse. Now that they have humbled the secular moderates and eliminated the possibility of a rapprochement with the United States that would allow "anti-Islamic" Western influence and values to "re-contaminate" Iran, they will be increasingly drawn to the realization that Iranian leftist groups and their Soviet patrons are their chief rivals for ultimate control of Iran. The Soviet war against Moslem insurgents in Afghanistan and reports of Soviet subversion within Iran (there are already reports that Soviet Azerbaijanis are infiltrating across the border into the Iranian province of Azerbaijan), should serve to further underscore this threat.

In order to defuse the appeal of Marxist economic programs to disgruntled Iranians who are becoming increasingly frustrated by high unemployment, high inflation and economic chaos, the Islamic fundamentalists will be subject to growing domestic pressure to reverse Western trade sanctions and recover Iran's frozen assets. This action could only occur after the hostages had been released (while the economic sanctions are relatively minor factors contributing to Iran's economic malaise, Iranians have demonstrated a marked tendency to blame all their problems on the United States, a perception which in this case would redound to America's benefit). Although Khomeini may be impervious to the logic of such a move, the shrewd Ayatollah Beheshti is likely to appreciate its benefits, especially once he has consolidated his growing political influence within the new Iranian political order. Given his dominant role in the Islamic Republican Party and his strengthening hammerlock on Iranian political life, the Ayatollah Beheshti looms large on the horizon as the key man to deal with in future efforts to free the hostages.

If Beheshti should require additional motivation to release the hostages, he should be made aware that the United States will become increasingly tempted to offer covert support to anti-Khomeini exile organizations and ethnic separatist groups unless a satisfactory solution to the hostage problem can be worked out. Military options are likely to prove to be of limited effectiveness given the strong emphasis placed on martyrdom by the Shiite revolutionary forces. Moreover, military sanctions would entail the risk of reprisals against the hostages and the risk of disrupting the vital flow of oil exports from the Persian Gulf. There are 42 million Shiites living around the rim of the Gulf and a significant number are scattered throughout the oilfields of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as well as Iran. If provoked to sabotage Persian Gulf oilfields, they might also be assisted by the Palestinian diaspora in the Gulf. However, military options should not be ruled out, if only to maintain the strength of the American bargaining position and impress upon the Iranians the certainty of military reprisals if the hostages are harmed.

By one count there are 282 U.S. embassies and diplomatic posts abroad staffed with almost 14,000 foreign service personnel in 144 host countries. In the final analysis, while the United States owes much to the hostages, it does not owe them a deal which would in any way jeopardize the future safety of American diplomatic personnel stationed abroad. The United States cannot afford to bend its principles in order to free the hostages. Such an action would only make overseas Americans hostage to the ambitions of a proliferating number of terrorist groups all over the world in the 1980s and beyond.

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